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ABSTRACT

In small rural school districts there are significant socioeconomic, cultural, and distance barriers to parent involvement in the education of exceptional children. In Florida, the history of parent involvement in exceptional student education parallels that of organized parent activism generally; rural, isolated, and minority group parents have had little involvement in either movement. Only a few models exist for parent and community participation in exceptional child education. Florida's three statewide programs are Parent to Parent of Florida, a peer support model; Parent Education Network, a parent education model; and Human Assistance Network Direction Services, an information and case management model. The Parent/Professional Partnership Model is used by the Parent Services Project in eight small rural school districts in northern Florida. The majority of families in these districts are minorities, are of low socioeconomic status, or are culturally divergent. This model focuses on mutual respect, reciprocal training, and common goals, and aims to develop a comprehensive plan covering educator and other professional training, parent education and training, parent participation, support services, sharing of information, networking, and advocacy. Detailed strategies for success with rural families in each of these areas are discussed, along with a practical outline for program development and implementation. This paper contains 18 references. (SV)

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Implementing Comprehensive Parent Services

in

Small Rural School Districts

BY

Patricia C. Davis

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Parent Services Project
Leon County School District

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RC 017265

Parent Services Project
Leon County School District
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Introduction

The Parent Services Project is a three-year multicounty effort to improve and expand services to parents of exceptional children, ages 0-21, in eight rural, small-sized school districts in North Florida. The theoretical approach that governs this project is based upon the premise that all aspects of a parent's life must be taken into account when parents deal with their child's exceptionality. This approach includes:

1. facilitating parents' normal grieving process;
2. emphasizing the importance of parents themselves taking responsibility for the on-going implementation of their child's program, primarily the community educational efforts;
3. emphasizing parents' roles as educator, supporter, consumer, initiator, communicator, creator, and advocate.

In rural small sized-school districts the barriers for parent involvement are significant. Isolation of parents, low socio-economic status, cultural differences, limited resources, limited knowledge and educational ability, lack of child care and transportation, multi-problem issues, intimidation by professionals, and lack of professional training create challenges for meeting the needs of rural families.

Special efforts through community involvement and interagency collaboration have been made to address the special needs of minority parents, handicapped parents, teenage parents, rural/isolated parents, non-reading parents, parents of low socio-economic status, single parents, and foster parents.

This paper will examine the history of parent involvement in Florida, review national models for parent participation, and summarize the Parent/ Professional Partnership Model for Small Rural School Districts. Strategies are focused on methods that are particularly applicable for rural, isolated, minority, and "hard to reach" families.

Historical Perspective
(Parent Services Executive Planning Committee, 1986)

Records throughout the United States document the history of parent involvement in exceptional student education beginning before the Civil War. Initially, parents of deaf, blind, and crippled children acquired legislative support for residential facilities, educational programs, and diagnostic services for their children. Parent groups for the mentally handicapped and physically handicapped were organized prior to World War II and expanded during and after the war. These groups were successful in acquiring legislative funding for educational programs. During the 1950's and 1960's, the movement of programs for the mentally handicapped into public schools began. Parents of learning disabled and emotionally handicapped populations became organized and demanded public school programs for their children. Other parents of handicapped children followed in the movement for public education services.

From the 1940's until the 1970's, parents advocated for appropriate services and programs for their children. This advocacy resulted in the passage of Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, which mandated free and appropriate education for all students, regardless of the handicapping condition.

During the 1980's, parent groups began to facilitate training and provide education for parents about Public Law 94-142. Statewide training in Florida was conducted by Florida's Protective and Advocacy Agencies and the Governor's Commission on Advocacy. In 1981, the Florida Diagnostic and Learning Resource Centers (FDLRS), under the direction of the Bureau of Education for Exceptional Students (BEES), included emphasis on parent information and training.

In 1985, BEES established the Parent Services Executive Planning Committee to assess the need for parent services in Florida. The Committee developed goals, objectives, and recommendations for improving and expanding parent services within the state of Florida. During this same time, two statewide parent organizations were established - Parent to Parent of Florida and the Parent Education Network.

BEES recognized the need for increased involvement from minority and "hard to reach" parents. In 1987, the Parent/Professional Task Force was formed to address these issues and to develop methods for increasing parent participation. Also in 1987, the University of South Florida/FDLRS Center provided funding for Human Assistance Network Direction Service (HANDS), previously a subcommittee of PEN, and BEES funded five demonstration Parent Services Projects in Florida. The regional projects will develop strategies for comprehensive parent services throughout Florida.

It is important to recognize that the history of exceptional student education runs parallel to a history of organized political action by parents. It is likely that most rural, isolated, or hard to reach parents had little involvement in this political movement.

Models of Parent Participation

Few local, state, or national models exist for parent and community participation in education. Those that do exist have been primarily federally funded (Edge & Kroth, 1985).

In Florida there are currently three statewide parent participation programs: Parent to Parent of Florida, a peer support model; Parent Education Network, a parent education model; and Human Assistance Network Direction Services, an information-casemanagement model. Each of these programs was established for or by parents, each strive to work cooperatively with local school districts and community agencies, and each functions independently.

Parent to Parent of Florida, Inc.

Parent to Parent of Florida support programs are based on the philosophy that parents, who themselves have experienced the joys and frustrations of parenting a special child, can offer new parents the richness of an empathetic, sensitive, and skilled listener who can extend friendship as well as valuable information on resources available to the family.

Parent-to-Parent of Florida works toward providing one-to-one support, encouraging effective communication, facilitating networking, enhancing public awareness, and identifying services gaps (Parent to Parent of Florida, 1986).

Parent Education Network of Florida, Inc. (PEN)

The Parent Education Network of Florida, known as "PEN," is a working coalition between parent support/advocacy groups, parents of handicapped individuals, professionals who are intimately involved in the problems of the handicapped, and dedicated members of the community at large.

PEN was organized to provide training programs for parents of handicapped children, identification of training and information programs presently available in handicap support groups, a network of PEN volunteers who can facilitate accessing PEN services for local parents of handicapped children, and a quarterly newsletter for parents of handicapped children. Training programs include communication skills, federal law, the evaluation process, and the individual educational plan (Parent Education Network of Florida, Inc., 1986).

Human Assistance Network Direction Service (HANDS)

Direction Service was founded in Florida by a group of concerned parents who were introduced to the concept by the National Direction Service Project in 1986. Originally a project of the Parent Education Network, it is now supported by various state agencies, volunteers, and local community service groups.

People with disabilities or chronic illness and their families face a complicated maze of educational, social, and medical services. Services are often scattered throughout the community and operated by a variety of agencies with different eligibility requirements. Millions of families have faced this dilemma without support, finding their own way through the maze in an attempt to meet the needs of their family member.

With the implementation of Direction Service, information will be provided to individuals and families on services available to high risk, disabled or chronically ill persons and their families. The goal of Direction Service is to provide a one-stop source of information and personal assistance program, and to eventually develop a "care management" system for special needs families (Human Assistance Network Direction Service, 1987).

Parent participation within local school districts can be categorized into three general areas: parent training, parent education and parent involvement (Edge & Kroth, 1985).

Parent Training concentrates on skill development in parents, involves a limited number of parents, and is delivered in schools, clinics, or educational centers by a group leader or on an individual basis.

Parent Education concentrates on general parent activities usually initiated by parents, involves the most active parents, and is generally delivered at the school district level through PTA's or PTO's,

Parent Involvement concentrates on parent activities initiated by both the parent and teacher, is designed to involve any parent in program activities, and is generally delivered at school building level by administrators, teachers and parents.

Even though many school districts provide parent service activities (newsletters, parent advisory committees, parent trainers, parent mediators, school study committees), there appears to be limited evidence of a comprehensive parent services model to address the needs of all parents.

Parent/Professional Partnership

In assessing the existing services and needs of parents in North Florida, a number of factors had to be considered in developing a successful and practical method for increasing parent involvement.

Eight of the targeted school districts were considered to be small-sized districts. The majority of the families within many of these districts are minorities, are of low socio-economic status, or are culturally divergent. Many of these parents may have experienced failure in school themselves and, as a result, now feel intimidated by professionals.

Professionals lack the training to create consistently successful methods of meeting the needs of rural families. The majority of professionals surveyed, in fact, had never completed any training in parent involvement strategies.

Assumptions often dictate reactions to parent involvement. Parents and professionals often fail to recognize the absolute impact parent involvement can make in the educational process of children. Moreover, parents and professionals may fail to recognize that culture creates boundaries which must be overcome.

Research documents the link between parent involvement and the academic and social development of children in school (Davies, 1988). Ann Henderson summarized this research:

> When parents are involved, children do better in school, and they go to better schools . . . Children whose parents help them at home and stay in touch with the school score higher than children of similar aptitude and family background, whose parents are not involved (Henderson, 1986).

Roger Kroth (1986) states that parents are not a homogeneous group; they have strengths as well as weaknesses, and they do have the ability to help professionals educate their children.

Culturally different family values and life styles do not necessarily mean "bad" (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1987). Many beliefs held by minority families may actually be a strength for coping with and caring for children with handicaps. Differences among people cannot be ignored, and culturally divergent groups cannot be stereotyped (Correa, 1989).

Changing family structures create new challenges for educators, especially those committed to parent involvement. Hodgkinson's (1985) report on the demographics of education further substantiates the changing family structure of children enrolled in schools. The report stresses some very important issues for educators. Specifically, it indicates

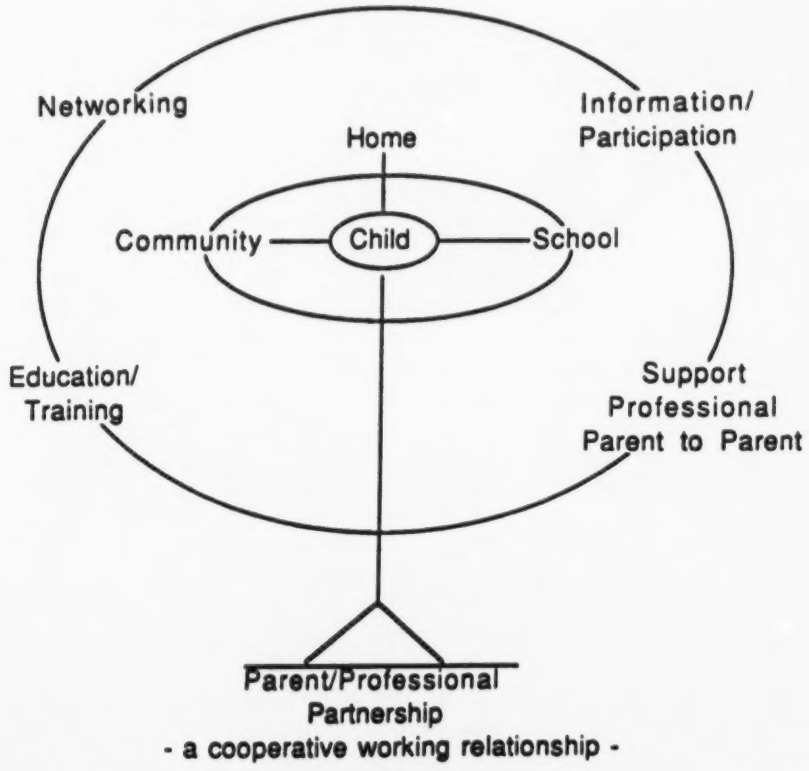
1. More children entering school from poverty households
2. More children entering schools from single-parent households
3. More children from minority backgrounds
4. A smaller percentage of children who have had Head Start and similar programs, even though more are eligible
5. A larger number of children who were premature babies, leading to more learning difficulties in school
6. More children from teen-age mothers.

Hodgkinson (1985) further states that the rapid increase in minorities among the school population is here to stay. Professionals are challenged to put aside the assumptions, the stereotypes, the attitudes of yesterday and create an educational system that is "reachable" for the families of the 80's.

Parent/Professional Partnership Model

The Parent/Professional Partnership Model is a comprehensive involvement plan for improving or expanding services to parents of exceptional students. Each component can be implemented individually or in conjunction with other components for more comprehensive services. A parent/professional partnership is truly demonstrated when a cooperative working relationship exists between parents and professionals. This partnership is highlighted by mutual respect and common understanding and is developed through comprehensive services to parents and professionals: training, education, participation, support, sharing of information, networking, and advocacy.

Developing new programs in rural school districts requires knowledge, commitment, and a tremendous level of creativity. For success, take small, but sure, steps to expanded services.



Networking

To effectively plan for parent involvement, it is extremely important to be aware of resources that are available within the community. Effective collaborative efforts through interagency councils and the community can create an array of services and programs available for parents. Guidance counselors, child study teams or councils serve as sources of sharing information, training and casemanagement for children and families.

The Parent Education Network (1986) defines three principles of networking.

1. Know the network - Become familiar with services that may serve the child.
2. Mobilize the network - Become acquainted with service providers face-to-face. Provide initiative to communicate with one another.
3. Develop a heart network - Become aware of positive and supportive qualities or personality traits in people. Energy and a positive attitude are traits of a true professional.

Strategies for Successful Networking
(Scaturro, 1986)

1. Become familiar with key resources (HRS, School System, Community Mental Health). Know the function of each resource, and meet staff face-to-face.
2. Become familiar with support services (basic needs, health, spouse and child abuse, area private therapists). Become familiar with the philosophies and specialties of the individuals on staff.
3. When working with a family, recognize that a network of community professionals may also be working with the family.
4. Develop a "heart" network of people you can count on or that have values similar to yours. This enhances your personal energy and strengthens services to the client timing.
5. Periodically reinforce and energize individuals in your network.
6. Be genuine with individuals in the network. People prefer honesty to false compliments.
7. Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know."
8. Respect each other's roles in the process. Avoid "put downs" of other professions or agencies.
9. Don't reinforce negative thinking. Practice a "can do" attitude, especially when parents are present.
10. Avoid professional jargon. Learn to use understandable, simple language when describing problems and solutions.
11. Recognize the traits of a networker. Signals include:

    a. knowing everyone when you walk in the room
    b. knowing people's "hidden agendas"
    c. knowing people's roles and the limits involved with those roles
    d. being sought for information and expertise
    e. being able to explain the network to others
    f. having the ability to influence policies that affect families

Information/Participation

Henderson (1986) describes five basic roles that parents assume in the education of their children.

1. Partners: parents performing basic obligations for their child's educational and social development.
2. Collaborators and Problem Solvers: parents reinforcing the school's efforts with their child and helping to solve problems.
3. Audience: parents attending and participating in school performances and productions.
4. Supporters: parents providing volunteer assistance to teachers, parent organizations, and other parents.
5. Advisors and/or Co-decision Makers: parents providing input on school policy and program.

Heleen (1988) identifies an additional role of parents, the role of advocate. Advocacy can be of two types: "either individual case advocacy or class advocacy." Heleen further states that "advocacy involves conflicting values and interests, but may happen in one-to-one situations, e.g., a parent advocating a 'better shake' for the child."

Empowerment is "a process through which people become more able to influence those people and organizations that affect their lives and the lives of those they care about" (Vanderslice, 1984). Advocacy efforts can lead to parent empowerment and positive change for children.

Progress toward family-centered, community-based programs must be a cooperative effort between parents and professionals. Leaders in advocacy (parents or professionals) must work collaboratively and network for change. "No one parent, no one agency or program is more important than another. All play a vital role in contributing to improving programs" (Odle, 1988).

Kroth (1985) describes levels of parent participation as illustrated by the Mirror Model. This model attempts to respect the strengths of parents as well as acknowledge parent needs:

Level 1: All parents receive and need basic information.
Level 2: Most parents would like to receive more specific information about their child's educational program and related activities.
Level 3: Some parents need and participate in workshops or training programs.
Level 4: A few parents need and request more intensive training development or therapeutic intervention.

When school districts begin to develop plans for improving or expanding services to parents, parent roles and levels of participation must be considered. One method will not address the needs of all parents. A continuum of services, however, can better address the varied needs of individual families.

Strategies for Successful Parent Participation
(Parent/Professional Task Force Report, 1987-1988)

1. Provide information to parents by a simple-to-read newsletter, teacher notes, pamphlets, etc. Information can be sent to isolated communities via persons who frequent the areas on a regular basis - mail carriers, utility meter readers, bus drivers, ministers, etc.
2. Utilize telephone trees, classroom parents, parent coordinator or classroom teacher to call parents.
3. Utilize local media - newspapers, radio and television.
4. Provide video tapes for viewing by parents in the home.
5. Make home visits to those families who are unable or unwilling to come to the school.
6. Plan programs that include the children, either as participants or performers. Coordinate efforts with state and local school and parent organizations for parent-to-parent support, training, or education.
7. Include parents as decision makers in school, district, and state planning and advisory councils.
8. Train parents as trainers, and recruit parents as school volunteers.
9. Schedule meetings at times and locations that are accessible and non-threatening to parents (church or other community locations).
10. Include child care and provide transportation or car pooling, if feasible.

Strategies for Successful Advocacy

1. Establish mutual respect and trust for parents and professionals alike.
2. Develop the commitment to team playing.
3. Establish the willingness to listen openly and without defensiveness to the perspectives of others.
4. Remember that the goal of advocacy is to improve programs for children and their families.

Support

The role of the supporter, parent or professional, is to acknowledge the feelings of parents and to recognize the legitimacy in having those feelings. Their purpose is not to attempt to "fix-it" by making the problems go away or making the hurt go away (Dawson & Terrien, 1984-85). Professional supporters can provide empathetic and sustained assistance which can enable parents to better understand and cope with all facets of life related to the exceptional student and their family (Parent Services Executive Planning Committee, 1986). Parent-to-parent support can provide peer assistance from parents who have "been there."

Strategies for Successful Support Services
(Dawson & Terrien, 1984-85)

1. Understand the grief process. Grieving is a normal reaction.
2. Recognize that parents fall in and out of grief at different stages of the child's life.
3. Recognize that mothers and fathers grieve at separate times and in different ways.
    a. Men are usually angrier and less likely to share feelings, especially guilt.
    b. Women most often turn anger inward and become depressed.
4. Recognize that parents of children with learning disabilities or emotional behavioral disturbances usually grieve for longer periods of time. Hidden handicaps are easier to deny.
5. Supporters must be neutral and non-judgemental.
6. Participate in a parent support training program. Become familiar with effective communication techniques and the do's and don't for supporting parents.

Education/Training

Professional Training

It has been documented in the research that professionals lack training to understand the techniques and methods for effectively involving hard-to-reach parents in the educational process (Parent/Professional Task Force,1987-1988). Most parents are "reachable," but professionals are either not trying to involve them or lack the knowledgeable and sensitivity to overcome barriers of culture, class, or language (Davies, 1988). "If school staff develops greater sensitivity and awareness to the barriers facing many parents, the criticism and blame for lack of participation can be replaced by a willingness to work with parents" (Parent/Professional Task Force Report, 1987-1988).

Strategies for Successful Professional Involvement

Require inservice training in cultural diversities and family involvement. Suggested topics are:

a. Benefits of parent involvement
b. Professionals working in partnership with parents
c. Communication skills
d. The grief process
e. Networking: Case management versus care management
f. The IEP in Partnership
g. Effective conferencing
h. Development of parent/professional involvement plans
i. Cultural differences: family structure, child rearing, family management, etc.

Parent Education/Training

Education and training for parents is directly related to parent need. The development of the parent/professional partnership should begin during the pre-placement process and continue throughout the child's educational program. Early involvement of parents creates the opportunity for the future development of the parent/professional partnership (Parent/Professional Task Force Report, 1987-1988).

The primary purpose of parent training is to identify certain behaviors, in the child or within the family, that are in need of change. Parents discuss strategies for changing behavior and methods for implementing these strategies within the family environment (Kroth, 1985). Parents are also taught how to evaluate the effectiveness of the program. Kroth suggests three formats for parent training.

1. Individual training accompanied by materials
2. A self-instructional package
3. Small group instruction

Parent education focuses on the parent becoming a part of the educational process. Schools often conduct special activities for educating parents about the educational process, child development or related matters (Kroth, 1985). Kroth also indicates that parent education allows for a wide range of persons to participate in forming educational policy, developing school curriculum, organizing extracurricular activities, etc. Suggested topic areas for parent training/education:

1. Basic Needs: nutrition, housing, clothing, financial resources, medical records, transportation
2. Family services: emotional support, counseling, stress management, time management, siblings, teaching your handicapped child at home
3. Working with professionals: communication skills, eligibility criteria for different programs, individual educational plan, developing a partnership with professionals
4. Legislation: rights of children, rights of parents, rights of adults with disabilities, trusts, guardianship, will planning
5. Transition services (from school to community work): sheltered/community employment, residential options (group homes, etc.)
6. Related Services
7. Community resources

Practical Applications for Rural Small Sized School Districts

Stage 1 - Assess, Network, Professional Training

1. Assess family strengths and needs.

   a. educational level
   b. socio-economic status
   c. family structures
   d. cultural differences
   e. traditions
   f. level of involvement
   g. interests

2. Assess attitudes and priorities of professionals within the school district and the community.

3. Assess community resources.

   a. social service agencies
   b. private foundations and service providers
   c. hospitals
   d. churches
   e. radio
   f. television
   g. civic organizations
   h. public library

4. Provide attitude framework and training for professionals.

   a. benefits of parent involvement
   b. professionals working in partnership with parents
   c. the grief process
   d. networking: case management verses care management
   e. the IEP in partnership
   f. effective conferencing
   g. development of parent/professional involvement plans
   h. cultural differences: family structure, child rearing family management, etc.

5. Establish interagency collaborative efforts for parents.

   a. information/referral
   b. case management
   c. coordination of services
   d. multi-agency training programs
   e. community based programs
   f. volunteer programs

Stage II - Information, Participation

1. Disseminate information to families and professionals.

   a. media - public service announcements
   b. parent information packets
   c. resource directory
   d. home-school notebooks
   e. newsletters
   f. video tapes

2. Develop methods for parent participation at various levels of involvement.

   a. partners
   b. collaborators and problem solvers
   c. audience
   d. supports
   e. advisors and/or co-decision makers

3. Develop interagency referral process for providing services to families.

   a. support
   b. training
   c. education

Stage III - Expand Information/Participation Strategies Training, Education Advocacy

1. Develop methods for parent training.

   a. home-based model
   b. video
   c. teacher-parent plan

2. Develop methods for parent education.

   a. community programs
   b. interagency collaboration
   c. school-based programs

3. Create opportunities for parents to be advocates for their children.

4. Create parent/professional information center to serve as single point for coordination of services and outreach activities to all families.

   a. networking
   b. information/participation
   c. support
   d. education/training

Summary

The purpose of this paper has been to examine the history of parent involvement in Florida, review national models for parent participation and to summarize the Parent/Professional Model for Small Rural School Districts.

Research indicates that when parents are involved, children do better in school. In rural, small-sized school districts, however, the barriers for parent involvement can be significant.

The Parent/Professional Partnership Model is one of involvement and commitment of parents and professionals. The potential for this partnership far exceeds the expectations of parents and professionals alike. The Model suggests that a true partnership is based upon a cooperative working relationship between parents and professionals. This partnership is highlighted by:

mutual respect
reciprocal training
common understanding
common vocabulary
common goals (Advisory Committee Task Report, 1986)

. . . and the positive result is the educational opportunity that can be created for children.

Parents and professionals alike are challenged to put aside the assumptions, the stereotypes, and the attitudes of yesterday. The goals are within reach, but the commitment must be strong.

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